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‘To be or not to be an internal consultant’

ABSTRACT

Internal consultancy is often characterized as the poor cousin of its external counterpart. Although there are some who support this view there are also those who point to the value of internal consultancy. In order to consider these conflicting views this chapter explores the nature of internal consultancy. It begins with a review of the literature which draws out the differences in terms of the role, impact and positioning of internal consultancy. The discussion that follows highlights the changing role of internal consultancy and, in particular, the blurring of the division between management and internal consultancy. The chapter concludes by arguing that the nature and boundaries of internal consultancy are shifting and highlights the need for organizations and researchers to recognize the impact that this may have.

INTRODUCTION

Internal consultancy is traditionally characterized as the ‘poor cousin’ of its external counterparts (Subbiah & Buono, 2013). Internal consultancy can take a variety of forms such as *‘independent subsidiaries or as departments embedded in the corporate hierarchy; as centralized headquarters functions or as decentralized, local staff; as profit centers billing market prices or as free internal services’* (Armbrüster 2006: 113). Whatever form it takes it is becoming increasingly important and indeed viewed as an alternative option to external consultancy for organizational change and transformation (Sturdy

et al, 2014). Indeed as Armbrüster (2006) points out the establishment of an internal consultancy may well signal that an organization is not content with external advice but has a strong focus on implementation, which in turn signals readiness for change and organizational adaptability.

The majority of the literature on consultancy tends to focus on the activities of consultancy firms (i.e. McDonald, 2015) and external consultants (i.e. Buono, 2015; Howlett, & Migone, 2013). In contrast, internal consultancy is an under-researched area (Sturdy & Wylie, 2011). It is unclear why this should be the case although it would seem likely that external consultancy is generally perceived as the higher status activity as well as being more visible (Sturdy et al, 2013). The external consultant is usually viewed as having higher levels of expertise, experience and credibility (Kubr, 2002). Paying for external services also implies the output is better or more valued (Kitay & Wright, 2007). In addition to these perceived advantages, externals are considered as being more up-to-date on the latest business ideas and ways of working, and of bringing the added value of a broader base of experience (Ramsden & Bennett, 2005). Although there are many who agree with this view there are also those who highlight the advantages of internal consultancy. Advocates point out that internal consultants have just as much expertise as external consultants (Armstrong, 1992) and have the additional advantage of knowing the business, including its culture, language and processes, from the inside (Kenton & Yarnall, 2012). Internal consultants are also considered to be well positioned to counsel their colleagues against hasty adoption of pre-designed solutions, which critics suggest are often offered by external consultants (Mabey, 2008). The fact that internal consultants are *“around in an*

organisation’ is considered of benefit as it *‘allows [them] exposure to organisational intelligence and the organisational memory which can help to build a picture which is useful’* (Mottram, 2016: 147). There are, therefore, a variety of opinions on whether or not internal consultants are the poor relationship in the consultancy profession.

This chapter aims to explore the role of internal consultancy and the challenges it faces in its identify. It begins by a review of the literature which draws out the differences of internal consultancy from external consultancy in terms of role, impact and positioning. The discussion suggests that some caution is needed in interpreting or accepting some of the standard definitions of internal consultancy, as there is an on-going blurring of the demarcation between internal consultancy and management. The chapter concludes by arguing that the nature and boundaries of internal consultancy are changing and highlights where the focus might be for future research in order to gain greater clarity about the role of internal consultancy. In this way the chapter contributes to the existing literature on internal consultancy.

Definition of internal consultancy

Definitions of consultancy vary in the literature. The most common are the exclusion and inclusion definitions (Kubr, 2002). The former, often favoured by professional associations, views consultancy as a special service where specific qualifications or capabilities are required to identify and analyse client issues and recommend solutions *‘in an objective and independent manner’* (Greiner and Metzger 1983: 245). In this way consultancy is a key *‘generator*

and distributor of new knowledge (Thrift, 2005: 35). Such a perspective is largely in keeping with the identity of consultancy, as a '*distinctive occupation*' (Kitay and Wright, 2007: 1615) compared to management. In particular, this definition proposes that consultants are specialist advisors in organizational change, whereas managers focus on its implementation (Armbruster & Kipping, 2002). Although such a view might be considered rather traditional, it is in accordance with definitions which distinguish consultancy from other management activities.

The second definition is the inclusive one and originates largely from the humanistic and process consultancy traditions (i.e. Schein, 1988). It emphasises the approach of providing help towards organizational improvement so that anyone can be a consultant regardless of their role in the organization. This means that, '*a manager can also act as a consultant if he or she decides to give advice and help to a fellow manager, or even to subordinates rather than directing them or issuing orders to them*' (Kubr, 2002: 3). This contradicts the first definition, which defines consultancy as exclusive and distinct from other roles. In practice, Sturdy and Wylie (2011) point out that both approaches may co-exist and be selectively applied.

Benefits of internal consultancy

Researchers vary in their views of the benefits of internal consultancy. Those who tend to support consultancy identify the benefits as helping to develop creativity and achieve radical organizational innovation or the '*disruption of dominant orders*' (Clegg et al, 2004: 36). In particular, Tisdall (1982) identifies

consultancy as providing expertise, extra staff and the facilitation of organizational change. To this can be added the role of legitimising knowledge and decisions (McKenna, 2006). Such benefits tend to fall broadly into the categories of perspective, people, process and politics (Czerniawska & Toppin, 2010). These characteristics relate to consulting projects and are client focused. However, researchers also out that it is also important to recognise that consultancy occurs at the margins of projects and beyond them (Sturdy, 2011). So for instance consultancy can also involve the research and development (R&D) of products and services, what is termed 'commodification' (Anand et al, 2007; Suddaby and Greenwood, 2001) as well as the diagnosis of the root causes of issues (Anderson, 2012). Such activities provide expertise and the facilitation of organizational change.

Researchers who are more critical highlight how consultancy has had an impact on the developing character of organizations and contributes to millions of people having to adjust to new ways of working (Fincham & Clark, 2001) and of thinking (O'Mahoney, 2010: 2). Others point out how consultancy has long been associated with securing efficiencies through job losses so that '*a significant percentage of the staff soon find that their services are surplus to requirements*' (Craig & Brooks, 2006: 106) although the extent to which this is the case is debated (Armbruster & Gluckler, 2007). More critically, Grint and Case argue that in certain contexts, '*the consultant's briefcase harbours the managerial equivalent of the great white shark?*' (1998: 560). A further critique is aimed at the non-legitimate or opaque influence of consultancy on decision-making (Sturdy, 2011) as democratic or rational

decision making processes are bypassed through elite personal relationships (Jones, 2003). Thus there are various criticism against the approach of consultants.

Regardless of which side of the fence they are on, both popular and academic commentators seem largely to agree that internal consultants and the ideas they purvey are highly significant (McKenna, 2006). O'Mahoney (2010) points out that they can exert enormous influence. So the impact that internal consultants have cannot be denied.

The identity of internal consultants

The impact of internal consultants is influenced by their identity. A key part of their identity is the role that they play in an organization. Researchers tend to agree that the internal consultant's aim is to lead and influence change through supporting clients (Anderson, 2012). To achieve this Buono and Subbiah (2014) suggest that the roles of internal consultants comprise of: trouble-shooter; sensor; research-analyst; coach and mentor; implementation supporter; adviser and critic. Since internal consultants are part of an organization, they have the opportunity to engage in such roles over the long term (van Aken, 2004) whereas external consultants typically have shorter interactions (Kitay & Wright, 2004). This dimension of the role of internal consultants is what Sturdy et al (2014) describe as 'internal-outsiders'. The 'internal-outsider' role is valued notably when the internal consultant is seen to operate outside of standard reporting structures (Sturdy & Wylie, 2011). This gives internal consultants a dual status whereby they can be both embedded

in the organization, but also outside of, or detached from, the immediate or daily operational concerns. Despite this apparent paradox, the dual status is often considered fundamental to the contribution that internal consultants can make. In particular, it allows internal consultants to emphasise their relative independence or objectivity; and to argue that they have a broader view of the organization which goes beyond the immediate departmental concerns.

In contrast, other studies point out the limitations of internal consultants. For instance, Buono and Subbiah (2014) found that although internal consultants are likely to be well socialized into the norms and beliefs of the organization and more sensitive to behaviours, they may be more subjective than objective to certain people. Critics point out that the ability of an internal consultant to see things with the fresh eyes of someone unfamiliar with the organization is limited and they may be unaware of the blind spots which can plague those who are too close to a situation (Mottram, 2016). Researchers highlight this especially when it comes to organizational politics as an internal consultant tends to be enmeshed within an organization's political system (Barnes & Scott, 2012). On the one hand this is advantageous in that it enables them to have a clear insight into who holds political power among the key stakeholders and how to manage them. However, on the other hand, they might also be driven by the organizational politics and relationships that exist and there is a strong probability that they may become ethnocentric after several years of being in the role (Sherrit, 2016). Buchanan (2016) stresses that the consultant who is not willing to play politics will fail, sooner or later, and probably sooner. Or as Louis Frankel says, 'if you don't play, you can't

win' (2014:19).

The literature highlights that the internal consultant is confronted with various tensions in their role. This is especially evident when they are faced with the dilemma that the best help that they can give may not be aligned with the manager's agenda (Appelbaum & Steed, 2005). Block (2011) recognises such tensions and describes how line managers may see internal consultants as being constrained by the same forces and madness that impinge on themselves. As a consequence managers may be slower to trust internal consultants and also to recognise that they have something of value to offer.

The skills and attributes which internal consultants bring to the role are often overlooked by managers when they are looking for support. Scott & Barnes, (2011) suggest that this can result in internal consultants being given mundane operational tasks whilst external consultants are given the more challenging, strategic change projects. This sidelining of internal consultants is, according to Kenton and Moody (2003) due to several factors including: the lack of understanding of the role of the internal consultant within the business; the poor credibility of the consultants themselves; and their lack of power to action projects. There appears, therefore, to be a lack of clarity and understanding about the role of internal consultants

Reactive And Proactive position

One approach for clarifying the role of internal consultancy is to examine whether the consultant is proactive or reactive – are they taking the lead, such as, suggesting to the manager that a particular situation should be examined,

or are they following the manager's lead, for example, the manager gives the consultant all the work (Hodges, 2016). The positioning of an internal consultant is illustrated in Figure 1.0. The horizontal access shows the type of role the consultant is expected to play. This can range from expert to facilitative.

The expert role involves providing knowledge to solve a problem defined by the client. The client defines the issue and asks the consultant to solve the problem (Schein, 1988). In this context the consultant's currency is their expertise. Once in this role, attempting to get the client to accept ownership and responsibility for the issue can be tricky and attempts by the consultant to release themselves from this expert role may cause anxiety for both the consultant and the client (Appelbaum & Steed, 2005). For the client supervision of the consultant's work can be challenging since the consultant's specialized knowledge is usually greater than the client's (Freedman & Zackrison, 2001). For this approach to work effectively, the client must have already conducted an accurate assessment of the issues and clearly defined the problem and indicated what they expect from the consultant.

In contrast to the expert approach, the facilitative approach involves the consultant being an expert in process consulting rather than specific content areas (Czerniawska, 2002). Compared to the expert approach which often involves 'off the shelf' solutions that may have general validity, but in fact are not the best option for the organization, facilitative consultancy has the advantage of being by its nature customized to specific situations (Kenton &

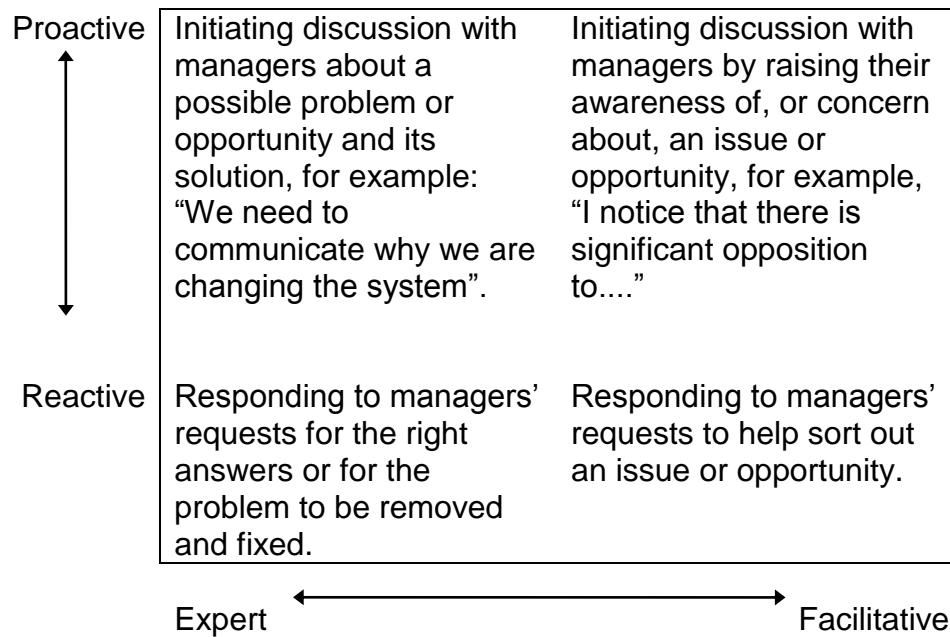
Yarnall, 2012). Similarly, whereas the expert approach will provide a toolkit of good practice methods, the facilitative approach will ensure that the tools which are employed will best fit the organization's needs.

In practice, internal consultancy involves employing a mix of expert and facilitative approaches, with the consultant adapting their approach depending on the context in which they are working.

The majority of internal consultants begin their consultancy careers in, the lower (reactive) half of the diagram in figure 1.0, and it is usually the aspiration of almost all of them to move upwards so that, at least for some of the time, they are taking the initiative and helping to move the organization forward. This is a positive strategy because it is in the proactive area that they potentially offer the organization the greatest value, as they may well alert managers to an external or internal opportunity or issue before anyone else does so. But it is also the area of greatest risk since to confront senior managers, and to seek to change their thinking, especially from a position lower down the hierarchy, is uncomfortable and potentially dangerous. That is why internal consultants require exceptionally well-developed interpersonal skills and self-awareness (Mottram, 2016).

Internal consultants need to know where their skills and energy lie on the spectrum running from providing advice at one end to being a facilitator at the other, and they need to understand whether there is a need for them to be proactive or reactive depending on the context in which they are working.

Figure1.0 Reactive and Proactive roles (adapted from Hodges, 2016)



Internal consultants can help an organization sustain successful change. Determinants of that success, however, are embedded in a full understanding of the organization, the internal and external drivers for change, the views of employees, the organization's needs, and its political and sociocultural realities (Hodges & Gill, 2015). By ensuring that staff, from senior management to front line employees, are knowledgeable about the challenges and opportunities faced by the organization, internal consultants can help to reduce the uncertainty involved in the change process (Buono & Subbiah, 2014). Internal consultants can help the organization develop and deploy an approach that interweaves understanding of issues and solutions, organizational development, resource needs, and infrastructure support, with interventions that provide social and emotional support for employees and a facilitative culture that supports change (Hodges, 2016).

Management as consultancy

The stance taken by internal consultants (reactive or proactive) is being affected by transformations in the role of management. Management can be seen to have changed in as much as it in some areas it resembles consultancy. Research indicates that the boundaries between internal consultancy and management are becoming less distinct (Sturdy & Wylie, 2011). In particular, organizational change has become a more explicit imperative and management activity to the extent that it has become less of a specialism (Sturdy and Grey, 2003). Likewise, formal and structured approaches to organizational changes and their management are more familiar to managers, in part due to the growth of formal management education, such as MBAs, but also to the recruitment of former external consultants into management positions (Sturdy and Wright, 2008). In addition, project working and programme management has extended well beyond its initial focus in engineering and IT and has resulted in the 'projectification' and 'programmification' of management work (Maylor et al, 2006).

A more explicit re-shaping of management into consultancy is evident in the way in which consultancy has been taken on by various management occupations and professions over the years (Sturdy & Wylie, 2011). This is especially evident in Human Resource Management (HRM) which has adopted a consultancy model as part of its desire for greater credibility and impact as 'business partners' (Vosburgh, 2007; Wright, 2008). Such changes undermine claims of consultancy being an exclusive occupation, as

management is carrying out consultancy along side internal consultants, thus blurring the boundaries between the two.

Consultancy as management

There are changes in internal consultancy itself which indicate that it appears to be moving closer to management. Consultants have become increasingly involved in implementing change as well as diagnosing the need and readiness for change and designing interventions (Morris, 2000). There is also an increasing use of consultants as an extra 'pair of hands' or 'body shops' - as a reserve army of management rather than as expert advisors (Scott & Barnes, 2011). A further change is the recruitment of experienced managers into some areas of consultancy, rather than appointing for example new graduates or MBAs (O'Mahoney, 2010). This has shifted the role of managers. Randall and Burnes (2016) point out that managers are brokering change and exercising the facilitation skills which were once the preserve of a consultant. This has the effect of further breaking down the barriers between managers and consultants (Sturdy, et al, 2009). Finally, in certain contexts, an explicit and distinctive consultancy identity is being played down or becoming less prominent or visible. In relation to this Clegg et al (2007) highlight that coaching is defining itself in opposition to consulting. Alternative labels are also being used in some organizations to replace 'consultancy', such as 'business transformation', 'business improvement' or 'change management' (Sturdy, 2011).

Whether or not internal consulting is moving into some form of identity crisis, it appears that its distinctiveness, from other parts of management, is under threat of erosion due the blurring of the boundaries between management and consultancy.

DISCUSSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Internal consultancy is ultimately about facilitating change. At the most basic level it requires helping management by analysing, diagnosing, researching, advising, implementing and evaluating change interventions (Hodges, 2016). Through proactively rather than reactively enacting consultancy for change an internal consultant can bring benefits. There is value in having 'inside' agents who understand what is going on, who have strong, established relationships, and who are skilled in their interventions (Czerniawska, 2002). Performing such an internal consultancy role can, however, be difficult, since internal consultants appear to operate in a highly equivocal space. They are permanent employees but also operate outside the traditional activities and structures of the business organization (Wright, 2009). While external consultants must also bridge organizational boundaries (Kitay and Wright, 2004) this process is intensified for internal consultants. External consultants can always walk away, while internal consultants have to stay and maintain relationships with their colleagues (Mottram, 2016).

The position of internal consultants is becoming more ambiguous as the boundaries between consultancy and management less defined. The rise of

the consultant-manager, the former consultant now occupying what may be a very senior position in a client organization, is becoming increasingly ubiquitous (Czerniawska, 2011) and may re-shape the role of internal consultancy.

There are a number of areas in which internal consultancy would benefit from future research. First, internal consultancy is seen to play an important role in delivering and facilitating change projects and programmes in organizations across a range of sectors (Sturdy & Wylie, 2011). However, it does so without there being an established model or even understanding of what is internal consultancy. Given that most understandings of internal consultancy derive from a comparison with its more prominent external cousin, there is a need for research into an alternative view in the hope of developing insight as to what it should be like in the future. For instance, for internal consultancy to retain its distinct position there may be scope for the emergence of a transformation specialism that simply eschews the title of 'consultant', and focuses more on, not only facilitating transformation but also sustaining it. Second, as internal consultancy is evolving there may also be benefit in research focusing on the more distinctive features of internal consultancy in order to understand its impact. For instance, there is a lack of comparative research which explores the role of internal consultancy during organizational transformation. Such research would shed some light on the impact of internal consultancy on organizational effectiveness. Third, there is scope for research into the capability and capacity required by internal consultancy during transformations. Until now it has been sufficient to transfer those attributes

considered sufficient for external consultants to those operating internally. Finally, research into the issue of the distinction between management and consultancy would be of benefit in order to help individuals decide 'to be or not to be an internal consultant'.

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